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Topics

Revealing Truth

■ On the Barbie Trail

By initially refusing to investigate the Klaus Barbie case, Attorney General William French Smith was unimaginative but not entirely unreasonable. History and national honor demanded a study of charges that American intelligence agents used and sheltered this notorious German war criminal after World War II. But why turn to the Justice Department, which is supposed to pursue criminals, not history?

The answer is, who else? What other agency could credibly trace the post-war deeds and travels of the "Butcher of Lyons," who as Gestapo chief in that French city from 1942 to 1944 arranged the persecution and murders of thousands of Jews and resistance fighters? The State Department, Army Intelligence and the C.I.A. are all among those charged with sheltering him. Fortunately, Mr. Smith has been made to see the point.

The choice to head the inquiry, Allan Ryan of the Justice special investigations office, is promising. His report should let Americans learn what was done for Mr. Barbie in their name and whether anything he gave in return was remotely worth sheltering him.